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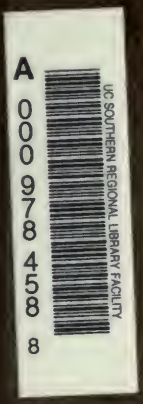

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PERSONS IN THE PLAY

HENRIETTE.
JACQUES.
ALBERT.

SCENE: *A drawing-room.*
TIME: *The present.*

Modesty

SCENE: *A drawing-room. Entrance* C.; *sofa, chairs, writing-desk.* JACQUES *and* HENRIETTE *enter* C., *from dinner.* HENRIETTE *in ball costume,* JACQUES *in evening dress. They come down* C.

HENRIETTE. What is it? Is it so terribly embarrassing?

JACQUES. You can easily guess.

HENRIETTE. You're so long-winded. You make me weary—come to the point.

JACQUES. I'll risk all at a stroke—— My dear Henriette, we are cousins. I am unmarried, you—a widow. Will you—will you be my wife?

HENRIETTE. Oh, my dear Jacques, what *are* you thinking of? We were such good friends! And now you're going to be angry.

JACQUES. Why?

HENRIETTE. Because I'm not going to give you the sort of answer you'd like.

JACQUES. You don't—you don't think I'd make a good husband?

HENRIETTE. Frankly, no.

JACQUES. I don't please you?

HENRIETTE. As a cousin you are charming; as a husband you would be quite impossible.

JACQUES. What have you against me?

HENRIETTE. Nothing that you're to blame for. It is merely the fault of my character; *that* forces me to refuse you.

JACQUES. But I can't see why you——?

HENRIETTE. *(With an air of great importance)* A great change is taking place in the hearts of us women. We have resolved henceforward not to be treated as dolls, but as creatures of reason. As for me, I am most unfortunate, for nobody ever did anything but flatter me. I have always been too self-satisfied, too——

JACQUES. You have always been the most charming of women, the most——

HENRIETTE. Stop! It's exactly that sort of exageration that's begun to make me so unsure of myself. I want you to understand once for all, Jacques; I have a conscience, and, furthermore, it is beginning to develop. I have taken some important resolutions.

JACQUES. What *do* you mean?

HENRIETTE. I have resolved to better myself, to raise my moral and intellectual standards, and to do that I must be guided, criticized——

JACQUES. But you already possess every imaginable quality: you are charitable, cultured, refined——

HENRIETTE. *(Annoyed)* Please! *(Turns away and sits on settee.* JACQUES *addresses her from behind chair)*

JACQUES. You are discreet, witty——

HENRIETTE. The same old compliments! Everybody tells me that. I want to be preached to, contradicted, scolded——

JACQUES. You could never stand *that.*

HENRIETTE. Yes, I could. I should be happy to profit by the criticism. It would inspire me.

JACQUES. I'd like to see the man who has the audacity to criticize you to your face——

HENRIETTE. That is enough! I trust you are aware that *you* are not the person fit to exercise this influence over me?

JACQUES. How could I? Everything about you pleases me. It can never be otherwise.

HENRIETTE. How interesting! That's the very reason I rejected your proposal. I sha'n't marry until I am certain that I shall not be continually pestered with compliments and flattery and submission. The man who marries me shall make it his business to remind me of my shortcomings, to correct all my mistakes. He must give me the assurance that I am continually bettering myself.

JACQUES. And this—husband—have you found him already?

HENRIETTE. What——? Oh, who knows?

JACQUES. Perhaps it's—Albert?

HENRIETTE. Perhaps it is—what of it?

JACQUES. Really!

HENRIETTE. You want me to speak frankly?

JACQUES. Of course.

HENRIETTE. Then—you wouldn't be annoyed if I said something nice about Albert?

*(*JACQUES *brings down* C. *chair which is by desk, facing* HENRIETTE.*)*

JACQUES. Why, he's your friend!

HENRIETTE. Oh! So you, too, have a good opinion of him?

JACQUES. Certainly.

HENRIETTE. Well, what would you say of him?

JACQUES. *(Trying to be fair)* I'd trust him with money—I've never heard he was a thief.

HENRIETTE. But in other ways?

JACQUES. *(Still conscientious)* I believe him to be somewhat—somewhat——

HENRIETTE. Wilful? Headstrong?

JACQUES. Um—uncultured, let us say.

HENRIETTE. As you like—but for my part, I find that that air of his inspires absolute confidence. He knows how to be severe at times——

JACQUES. You're mistaken about that; that's only simple brute force. Go to the Zoo: the ostrich, the boa constrictor, the rhinoceros, all produce the same effect on you as your Albert——

HENRIETTE. My Albert? My Albert? Oh, I don't appropriate him so quickly as all that. His qualifications as censor are not yet entirely demonstrated.

*(*JACQUES *rises and approaches* HENRIETTE, *who maintains an air of cold dignity.)*

JACQUES. For Heaven's sake, Henriette, stop this nonsense!

HENRIETTE. What nonsense?

JACQUES. Tell me you are only playing with me. That you only wanted to put my love to the test! To make me jealous! To torture me! You have succeeded. Stop it, for Heaven's sake——

HENRIETTE. My dear friend, I'm very sorry for you. I wish I could help you, but I cannot. I have given you a perfect description of the husband I want, and I am heart-broken that you bear so remote a resemblance to him.

JACQUES. Only promise you will think over your decision.

HENRIETTE. It is better to stop right now.

JACQUES. Don't send me away like this. Don't——

HENRIETTE. I might give you false hopes. I have only to tell you that I shall never consent to be the wife of a man who cannot be the severest of censors.

JACQUES. *(Kneeling)* I beg you!

HENRIETTE. No, no, no, Jacques! Spare me that. *(A telephone rings in the next room)* There's the 'phone——

JACQUES. Don't go!

*(*HENRIETTE *rises hastily and goes to door.* JACQUES *tries for a moment to stop her.)*

HENRIETTE. I must go. Go away, I tell you. I'll be furious if I find you here when I come back.

JACQUES. Henriette!

HENRIETTE. *(Coming down* L. *to table)* Not now! Please, Jacques. *(Exit)*

JACQUES. I can't leave it that way. I am the husband who will make her happy. But how? That is the question.—*(Pause)* Ah, Albert!

(Enter ALBERT. *He shakes hands with* JACQUES.*)*

ALBERT. How are you, rival?

JACQUES. *(Gravely)* My friend, we are no longer rivals.

ALBERT. How's that?

JACQUES. I have just had a talk with Henriette; she refuses to marry either one of us.

ALBERT. Did she mention me?

JACQUES. Casually.

(Both sit down: ALBERT *on sofa,* JACQUES *on chair near it.)*

ALBERT. What did she say?

JACQUES. Oh, I wouldn't repeat it; it wouldn't be friendly.

ALBERT. I *must* know.

JACQUES. Very well, then—she said that you had not succeeded—nor had I—to find the way to her heart. Between you and me, we've got a high-

minded woman to deal with, a philosopher who detests flattery. It seems you have been in the habit of paying her compliments——

ALBERT. I never pay compliments.

JACQUES. Whatever you did, she didn't like it. Moreover—since you want the whole truth—you seem to her a bit—ridiculous.

ALBERT. Pardon?

JACQUES. The very word: ridiculous. She wants a husband who will act as a sort of conscience pilot. Evidently, you haven't appealed to her in that capacity.

ALBERT. Sometimes I used to be rather sharp with her——

JACQUES. You did it too daintily, perhaps; you lacked severity. I'll wager you smiled, instead of scowled—that would have been fatal!

ALBERT. I don't understand.

JACQUES. Henriette is a singular woman; to get her, you have to tell her that you don't like her—her pride demands it. Tell her all her bad qualities, straight from the shoulder.

ALBERT. *(Feeling himself equal to the task)* Don't worry about that! *(Rises and walks about)* I know women love to be told things straight out.

JACQUES. I'm not the man for that; nor are you, I suppose?

ALBERT. No?—Jacques, I'm awfully obliged to you; you've done me a good turn——

JACQUES. Don't mention it——

ALBERT. You want to do me one more favor?

JACQUES. *(Devotedly)* Anything you like!

ALBERT. Promise me you'll never let Henriette know that you told me this?

JACQUES. I promise; but why?

ALBERT. You know she has to understand that my behavior toward her is in character. Natural, you see.

JACQUES. Oh, you're going at it strenuously.

ALBERT. I am.

JACQUES. Your decision honors you.

ALBERT. Let's not have Henriette find us together. Would you mind disappearing?

JACQUES. With pleasure. I'll look in later and get the news.

*(*JACQUES *rises.)*

ALBERT. Thanks, Jacques.

JACQUES. Good-bye, Albert. *(Exits after shaking hands cordially with* ALBERT*)*

HENRIETTE. *(Re-entering as* ALBERT *assumes a rather severe attitude)* How are you? *(Pause)* Have you seen Jacques?

ALBERT. *(With a determined air)* No, Henriette. Thank God!

HENRIETTE. Why?

ALBERT. Because it pains me to see men in your presence whom you care nothing for.

HENRIETTE. *(Delighted)* You don't like that? *(Sitting down on sofa)*.

ALBERT. No, I don't. And I'd like to tell you——

HENRIETTE. About my relations with Jacques?

ALBERT. Oh, he's not the only one.

HENRIETTE. Heaps of others, I suppose?

ALBERT. *(Sits on chair near sofa)* You suppose correctly; heaps.

HENRIETTE. Really?

ALBERT. You are a coquette.

HENRIETTE. You think so?

ALBERT. I am positive.

HENRIETTE. I suppose I displease you in other ways, too?

ALBERT. In a great many other ways.

HENRIETTE. *(Really delighted)* How confidently you say that!

ALBERT. So much the worse if you don't like it!

HENRIETTE. Quite the contrary, my dear Albert; you can't imagine how you please me when you talk like that.—It's perfectly adorable.

ALBERT. It makes very little difference to me whether I please you or not. I speak according to my temperament. Perhaps it is a bit authoritative, but I can't help *that.*

HENRIETTE. You are superb.

ALBERT. Oh, no: I'm just myself.

HENRIETTE. Oh, if you were only the——

ALBERT. I haven't the slightest idea what you were about to say, but I'll guarantee that there's not a more inflexible temper than mine in Paris.

HENRIETTE. I can easily believe it. *(Pause)* Now tell me in what way you think I'm coquettish. *(Sitting on edge of sofa in an interested attitude.* ALBERT *takes out cigarette, lights and smokes it)*

ALBERT. That's easy; for instance, when you go to the theater, to a reception, to the races. As soon as you arrive, the men flock about in dozens; those who don't know you come to be introduced. You're the talking-stock of society. Now I should be greatly obliged if you would tell me to what you attribute this notoriety?

HENRIETTE. *(Modestly)* Well, I should attribute it to the fact that I am—agreeable, and pleasant——

ALBERT. There are many women no less so.

Henriette. *(Summoning up all her modesty to reply)* You force me to recognize the fact——

ALBERT. And I know many women fully as pleasant as you who don't flaunt their favors in the face of everybody; *they* preserve some semblance of dignity, a certain air of aloof distinction that it would do you no harm to acquire.

HENRIETTE. *(With a gratitude that is conscious of its bounds)* Thanks, thanks so much. *(Drawing back to a corner of the sofa)* I am deeply obliged to you——

ALBERT. Not at all.

HENRIETTE. In the future, I shall try to behave more decorously.

ALBERT. Another thing——

HENRIETTE. *(The first signs of impatience begin to appear)* What? Another thing to criticize?

ALBERT. A thousand! *(Settling himself comfortably)*

HENRIETTE. Well, hurry up.

ALBERT. You must rid yourself of your excessive and ridiculous school-girl sentimentality.

HENRIETTE. I wonder just on what you base your statement. Would you oblige me so far as to explain that?

ALBERT. With pleasure. I remember one day in the country you were in tears because a *poor* little mouse had fallen into the claws of a *wretched* cat; two minutes later, you were sobbing because the *poor* cat choked in swallowing the *wretched* little mouse.

HENRIETTE. That was only my kindness to dumb animals. Is it wrong to be kind to dumb animals? *(She is about to rise when* ALBERT *stops her with a gesture)*

ALBERT. That would be of no consequence, if it weren't that you were of so contradictory a nature that you engage in the emptiest, most frivolous conversations, the most——

HENRIETTE. *(Slightly disdainful)* Ah, you are going too far! You make me doubt your power of analysis. I am interested only in noble and high things——

ALBERT. And yet as soon as the conversation

takes a serious turn, it's appalling to see you; you yawn and look bored to extinction.

HENRIETTE. There you are right—partly.

ALBERT. You see!

HENRIETTE. *(Sharp and even antagonistic)* Yes, I have that unfortunate gift of understanding things before people have finished explaining them. While the others are waiting for the explanation, I can't wait, and I fly on miles ahead——

ALBERT. Hm—that sounds probable; I sha'n't say anything more about that just now. But while I'm on the subject, I have more than once noticed that you are guilty of the worst vice woman ever possessed——

HENRIETTE. And what, if you please?

ALBERT. Vanity.

HENRIETTE. I, vain? Oh, you're going too far!

ALBERT. *(Unruffled)* Not a word! Every time I tell you a fault, you twist it round to your own advantage. Whereas, you are really worse——

HENRIETTE. *(Rising and gathering her skirts about her with virtuous indignation)* You are rude! I suppose you would find fault with me if I considered myself more polite than the person whom I have the honor to address?

ALBERT. I hope you don't intend that remark as personal?

HENRIETTE. I certainly do. *(She crosses to the other side of the stage, and sits down.* ALBERT *rises and goes up to her)*

ALBERT. Henriette! No! *(Laughing)* I see your trick!

HENRIETTE. What do you mean?

ALBERT. You can't deceive me by pretending to be angry. You wanted to see whether I could withstand your temper. Let us now proceed to the next chapter: your manner of dressing.

HENRIETTE. *(Now really outraged)* My man-

ner of dressing? You dare! *(*HENRIETTE *crosses* L. *Front,* ALBERT *following her)*

ALBERT. Yes, that will be enough for to-day——

HENRIETTE. And then you'll begin again to-morrow!

ALBERT. Yes.

HENRIETTE. And do you think for one minute that I'll listen to you while you insult me to my face? *You* are the vain one, to think you can come to that! *You* are the frivolous one, *you* are the——

ALBERT. *(Slightly perturbed)* Be careful what you say!

HENRIETTE. I'll take care of that.—Let me tell you that you are a detestable cynic. You are disgustingly personal; always dwelling on details, on the least——

ALBERT. Which is as much as calling me a fool?

HENRIETTE. Just about. You would be if you didn't read your morning paper regularly; so regularly that I know in advance exactly what you are going to say to me during the day.

ALBERT. Why not call me a parrot?

HENRIETTE. That would flatter you, for you don't speak as well as a parrot; a parrot's memory never gets clouded, a parrot has at least the common politeness to——

ALBERT. *(Between his teeth)* I won't stand for this. I wonder how you could have endured me so long if you thought me such a fool.

HENRIETTE. I believed you harmless.

ALBERT. Are you aware that you have wounded me cruelly?

HENRIETTE. *You* have wounded *me.* Thank Heaven, though, we had this discussion! Now I'll know how to conduct myself toward you in the future.

ALBERT. Thank Heaven for the same thing! It

was high time! I grieve to think that only last night, I had fully made up my mind to ask you to be my wife!

HENRIETTE. My dear friend, if you ever do so, I shall show you the door immediately.

(Enter JACQUES *hurriedly.* HENRIETTE *runs to him as for protection.)*

JACQUES. What's all this noise? What's the matter?

HENRIETTE. Oh, Jacques—I'm so glad you've come.

ALBERT. Just in time! You put an end to our pleasant little tête-à-tête.

JACQUES. But what's happened?

HENRIETTE. Well, Monsieur here——

ALBERT. No, it was Mademoiselle who——

*(*HENRIETTE *and* ALBERT *each take an arm of* JACQUES *and bring him down-stage* C. *His attention is constantly shifting from one to the other, as they address him in turn.)*

HENRIETTE. Just think, Jacques——

ALBERT. Jacques, she had the audacity to——

HENRIETTE. Stop! I'm going to tell him first——

JACQUES. You're both too excited to explain anything. Albert, you take a little stroll and cool off.

ALBERT. *(Retreating toward the door)* Charmed.

HENRIETTE. Then I can draw a free breath.

JACQUES. *(To* ALBERT*)* I'll fix up things while you're away.

ALBERT. *(To both)* I won't give in.

HENRIETTE. Neither will I.

JACQUES. Tut, tut!

ALBERT. Good-day, Mademoiselle.

HENRIETTE. Good-day.

JACQUES. Good-day, Albert. *(Exit* ALBERT*)*

HENRIETTE. Thank goodness, we're rid of him!

JACQUES. *(Sympathetically)* Tell me all about it.

HENRIETTE. *(Sits down on sofa, inviting* JACQUES *by a gesture to do the same. He sits beside her)* That man invented the most abominable things about me; criticized me to my face!

JACQUES. He did!

HENRIETTE. It was so ridiculous—makes me sick to think about it.

JACQUES. My dear Henriette, don't think about it. Albert must have behaved like a brute to make you so angry.

HENRIETTE. Yes, don't you think so?—*You* think I'm right?

JACQUES. *(Loyally)* Of course I do.

HENRIETTE. *(At her ease once more)* You encourage me, Jacques.

JACQUES. When I saw you were angry, I said to myself at once: "Henriette is right."

HENRIETTE. Really?

JACQUES. I said it because I knew you were by nature peace-loving and considerate——

HENRIETTE. *(With profound conviction)* Well, I think that's the least that could be said of me.

JACQUES. In any event, you are always tactful, you always——

HENRIETTE. *You* know me, Jacques!

JACQUES. I flatter myself. I felt instinctively you couldn't be wrong. You have always been so admirably poised, so unfailingly considerate.

HENRIETTE. *(With perfect simplicity)* Frankly now, do I ever lose my temper with you?

JACQUES. *(In good faith)* Never. With me you are always patient, gracious, modest——

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